

Summary

Let Charles Hodge summarise all this. These extracts from his *Systematic Theology* perfectly illustrate what I have been trying to say.

Hodge, addressing what he called ‘the subjects of baptism’, immediately – please note the word – immediately quoted the Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 95:

Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, till they profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him: but the infants of such as are members of the visible church are to be baptised.

Well, of course, if the Westminster documents are the touchstone, end of story! But Hodge, for all his seeming confidence, knew he was on dodgy ground. He went on:

The question: ‘Who are the proper subjects of baptism?’ is determined by the design of the ordinance and the practice of the apostles.

Ah! What an about-face! But – and what a ‘but’ – Hodge yet again immediately – immediately – continued:

It has been shown that, according to our standards [that is, the Westminster documents]...

That’s let the cat out of bag good and proper, has it not, and right from the start. The subjects of baptism? ‘Our Confession says...’ True, the question is decided by apostolic command and practice, but – and here’s the rub – but all is to be governed by the Confession: ‘As our Confession says...’. It is all very well to trot out the mantra *sola Scriptura*,¹ but is it not about time that the reality is spelled out – in English: ‘Scripture, once we have filtered it through the Westminster, the 1689 or whatever’?

¹ That is, ‘Scripture alone’.

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Moreover, do not miss the connection between baptism and church – especially the way ‘church’ has to be adjusted to cope with *infant* baptism. I remind you of what Hodge quoted:

Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, till they profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him: but the infants of such as are members of the visible church are to be baptised

These facts all sound the clearest of warnings. Who will heed them?

Hodge, coming to infant baptism, at once hit the crux:

The difficulty on this subject is that baptism from its very nature involves a profession of faith; it is the way in which, by the ordinance of Christ, he is to be confessed before men; but infants are incapable of making such confession; therefore they are not the proper subjects of baptism. Or, to state the matter in another form: the sacraments² belong to the members of the church; but the church is the company of believers; infants cannot exercise faith, therefore they are not members of the church, and consequently ought not to be baptised. In order to justify the baptism of infants, we must attain and authenticate such an idea of the church as that it shall include the children of believing parents...

Let me translate: Hodge was here openly admitting that Scripture demands faith before baptism and that Scripture teaches that the church is composed of believers. Wow! Infant baptisers, however, insist on the baptism of infants – who cannot exercise saving faith. It follows, therefore, that they have to tamper with the biblical doctrine of the church so that the church is said to include the sprinkled babies of believers. Hodge, therefore, was prepared to cobble together some sort of justification for the dreadful practice in both its aspects, radically re-writing the biblical doctrine on the church and baptism. He did this by what he called a series of ‘propositions’ on the church. Do not fail to see how these

² I let the offensive word stand. See my *Infant*.

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propositions directly contradict what he had already openly admitted to be scriptural principles:

1. The visible church is a divine institution.
2. The visible church does not consist exclusively of the regenerate.
3. The commonwealth of Israel was the church.
4. The church under the New dispensation [Testament or covenant] is identical with that under the Old.
5. The terms of admission into the church before the advent [of Christ] [that is, the Jewish church] were the same [as] that are required for admission into the Christian church.³
6. Infants were members of the church under the Old Testament economy.
7. There is nothing in the New Testament which justifies the exclusion of the children of believers from membership in the church.
8. Children need, and are capable of receiving the benefits of redemption.

As you can see, Hodge has superbly – though inadvertently – illustrated my thesis. Leaving aside the final proposition (which is irrelevant to the question in hand), the seven other propositions constitute nothing more than a nonsensical theological-fandango, an attempted justification for the breaking of Scripture on the doctrine of the church.

Hodge followed all this up by shooting himself in his other foot: he tried to answer the question: ‘Whose children are entitled to baptism?’ His answer was nothing if not frank:

This is a very delicate, difficult, and important question. No answer which can be given to it can be expected to give general satisfaction. The answers will be determined by the

³ *Christian* church? There is no other in this debate.

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views taken of the nature of the church and the design of the sacraments.⁴ Probably the answer which would include most of the views entertained on the subject [by Presbyterians, at least], is that the children of the members of the visible church, and those for whose religious training such members are willing to become responsible, should be baptised. But this leaves many questions undecided, and allows room for great diversity of practice.

He could say that again! In this shameful way, Hodge has ended up with mixed churches. And that is the best that can be said for his *Systematic Theology* on this issue. In the worst scenario, many – including many Reformed Presbyterians – think that the sprinkling of babies actually regenerates them.⁵ Talk about ‘mixed churches’! Spare a thought for the millions of sinners who think they have been regenerated by a few drops of water! Think of them living, dying – and entering eternity – on the basis of that delusion!

⁴ Once again, I let the offensive word stand.

⁵ See my *Infant* for documentary proof.